

Historical-sociological research FRANCE

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The rural origins of French familialism

The history of the transformations of the family forms of organisation in France during the modern and contemporary period can be described as the interplay between three variables: law, economy and ethics of the family. In spite of the promulgation of the Civil Code (1804), a variety of inheritance customs related to the perpetuation of the family still prevailed at the end of the XIXth century. Three major types have been observed:

- the house-oriented system where the property is unified as an estate which is supposed to be transmitted intact to the next generation through a main heir, chosen by the head of the household, a substitute of the roman paterfamilias;
- the lineage oriented system or parentela oriented system, where the real unit of familial life is a network of kin (patrilineal kin in the case of a lineage and cognatic kin in the case of a parentela) ;
- the married-couple oriented system, where the continuity of a family, more or less associated with a household, is the dominant principle.

The most striking factor is the persistence of these different family models in spite of the overall change in the French society. The feeling, in France, that the family, as an institution, is the key factor in human well being certainly finds its roots in this strong rural background (even though nowadays the proportion of people living from farming is down to 6%). This particular trait of French culture can be viewed as an asset or a liability. Family networks are still considered as effective means of support in situations of personal crisis due to circumstances or to old age. On the reverse, it is a handicap to geographical mobility because most people cannot imagine living far from their familial cradle: they would feel insecure and deprived of the very source of their identity. Young people do not want to move out of many rural areas in France, in spite of a severe and widespread situation of unemployment which could be solved if they accepted to migrate.

French family policies from familialism to individualism

The origins of family policies date back to the end of the XIX th century. With a first law (November 1938) creating family allowances, independent from salaries and firms, and the Code de la famille promulgated in July 1939, the way was paved for the development of the family policies. Based on the model of a couple with the male breadwinner and the female at home, it will last until the 1970s. The nature of provisions characterizes the « familialisme à la française », targeting the family and not the individual (as is the case in Denmark for instance). In the 1970s, a change took place after a long period of economic growth. From then on, the focus will target those in dire need (often single mothers, aging dependants, unemployed). The French labour market being characterized by the presence of mothers of young children (in 2003, more than 80% of women having a child under 3, for example, were working), policies have aimed at sustaining these working mothers through provisions regarding child care; besides, France's kindergardens are host to 90% of children aged 3 and over. A new problem has been arising for the past ten years, linked to the cost of the consequences of aging. According to INSEE, France will count almost 4 million people aged 80 in 2020, that is 1,8 times more than in 2000 and in 2040, there could be almost 7 million persons aged 80 and more, that is 3,2 times more than in 2000.



In the family home, during the vacations, pictures are shot to keep track of happy moments (Source: Martyne Perrot 1998 "La maison de famille")

The overthrow of patriarchalism

The State has also, as a provider of a normative frame, followed the cultural changes of the family. In the 1804 Napoleon Code, the family did not exist out of marriage. Due to a number of economic and cultural changes regarding values and the place of women within society, the patriarchal construction of the family has been dismantled throughout a series of laws tending to acknowledge the variety of family forms. The 1965 July 13th Act reformed the matrimonial rules to ensure equality between spouses. In 1970, the law substituted to the notion of « puissance paternelle » that of « autorité parentale » and the heading of « household head » disappeared. Two divorces laws (1975, 2005) have deeply altered the nature of the marriage union which is no more indissoluble in its principle. The spread of cohabitation without marriage and the increase of the number of children born outside of wedlock gave the impulse to acknowledge legally the possibility to live one's private life without the State intervention. Slowly community of life and bed have been recognized in the law, through the institution of the PACS (in November 15th 1999), opened to both heterosexual couples and homosexual pairs.

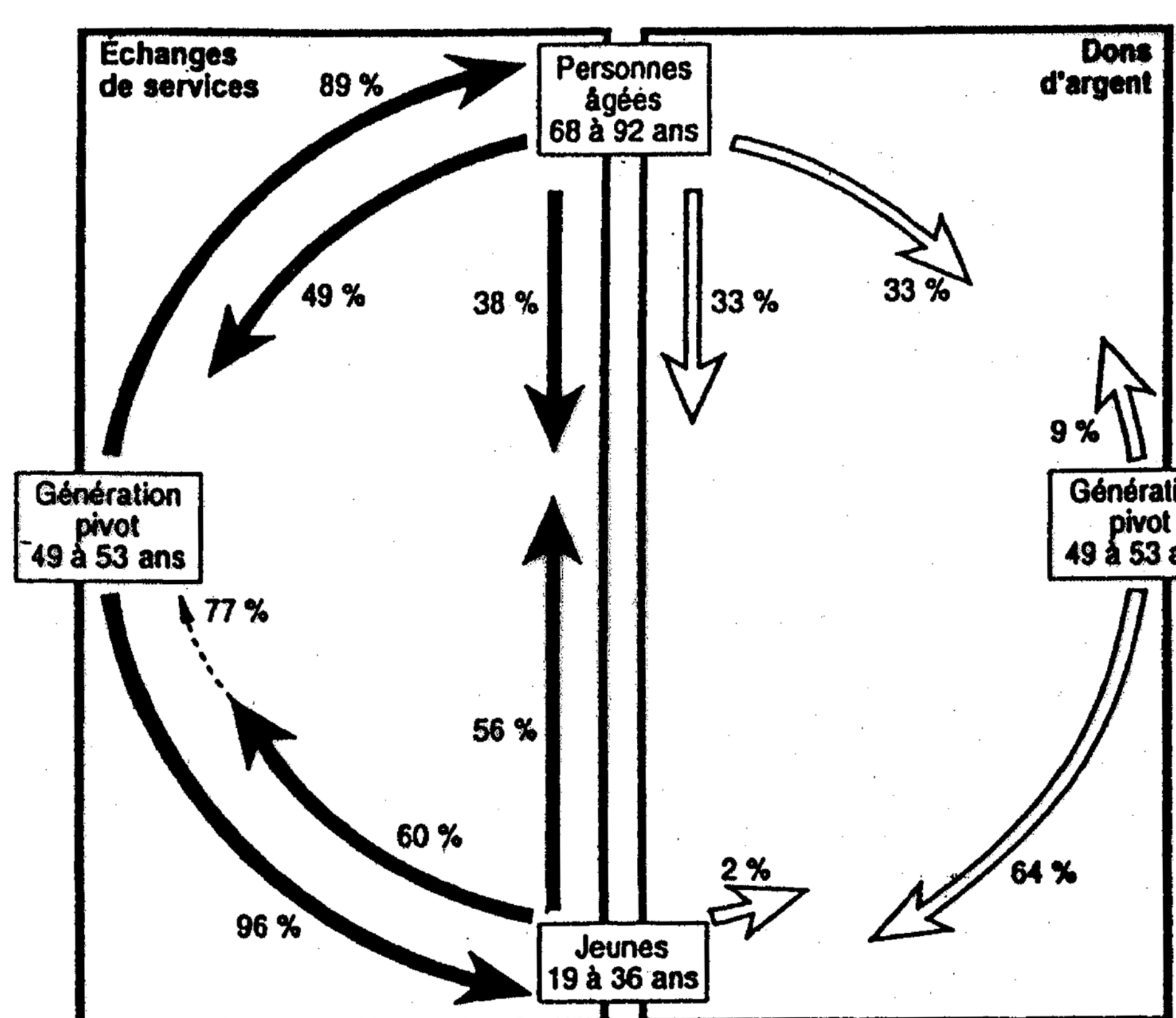
Availability of kinship

The availability of kinship seems to be general in France, though in relationship with the income level of the family ready to help, that is to say the central couple (named « pivots » in a three generation survey). If the importance of kin networks is assessed in all social categories, they widely differ from one to another. For the wealthiest, independence is the rule and exchanges and support sustain the goal of social reproduction; for the poorest, help takes shape within the extended family so that services and help can be exchanged on a much more frequent basis.

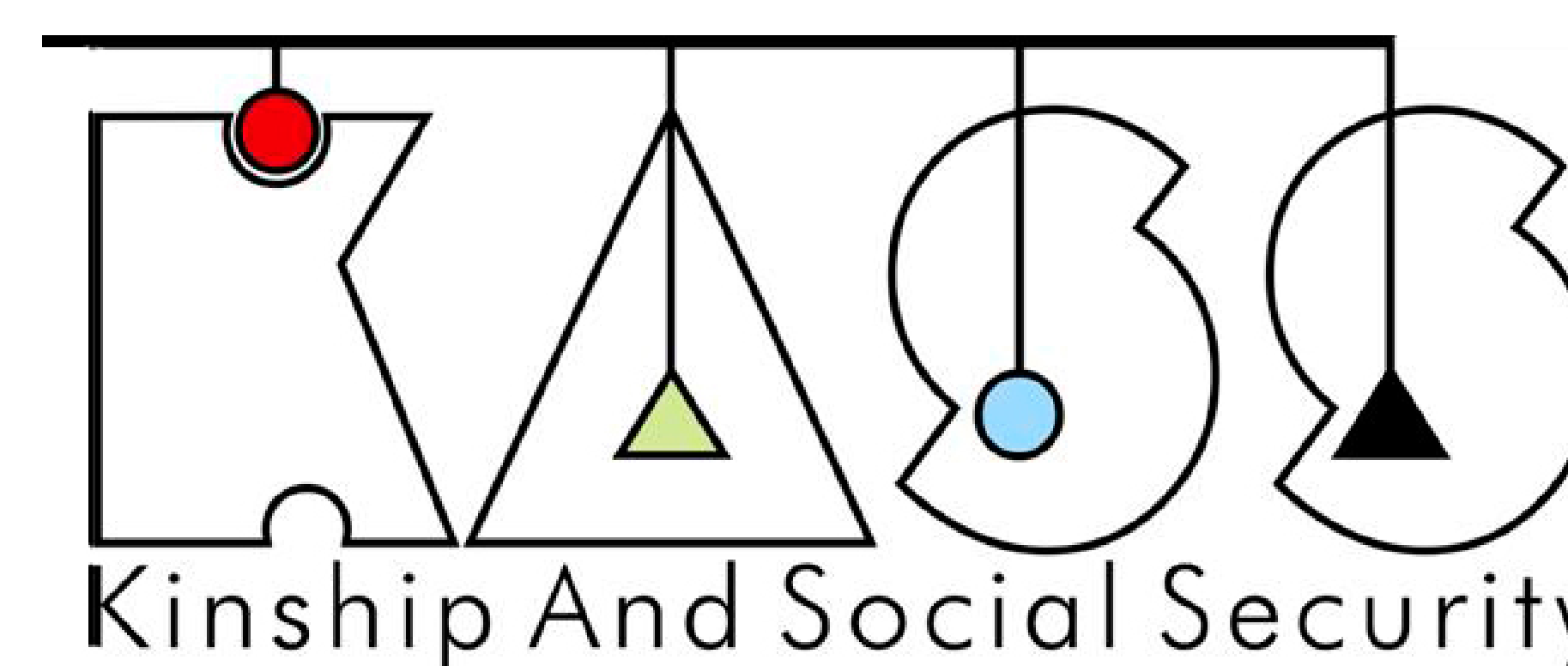
It has been shown, and our ethnographic data confirm this result (see Augustins and Sourdril, Chevalier and Amiotte-Suchet, Segalen and Manceron,,)

that stability of family and kin revolves around the secondary homes, which are characteristic of the French situation. This is where grandparenting comes in, 38% of couples with grandchildren, as against 33% of those without, own this kind of house, where parents, grand-parents and grand-children meet. And this house plays an essential role in creating ties within the kin network, building common memories among cousins. At the macro-economic level, however, these exchanges of services and money support have no redistributive effect, which means that they don't bring, at the national level, social equity. They have a compensatory effect within lines, thus digging the distance between the most well off and the poorer ones, and not compensating for the differences.

The rediscovery of kinship and kinship ties has nothing to do with "tradition" or "traditional society". They are a strong component of the XXIth century society, a strong basis for stability which is all the more obvious with the negative consequences for those who are deprived from them. Public and private support appear inseparable, they are not exclusive of one another. To diminish public allowances would weaken private support and make families more dependent. Transferring expenses to families in order to solve social and financial problems is pure illusion.



The graph should be read as such: In the Pivot generation, 9% make money gifts to their parents and 64% to their children (Source: C. Attias-Donfut 1995)



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